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GLIMPSES OF THE LINGUISTIC SITUATION IN SOLOMON ISLANDS

INTRODUCTION

Solomon Islands, being a part of Melanesia, the Pacific, provide a rich map of linguistic diversity. Melanesia includes the countries Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea and Fiji, of which the four first-mentioned are well-known for their extremely high number of indigenous languages. This should be seen in contrast with Polynesia, another region in the Pacific with a few closely related languages. The situation in the Melanesian countries has lead to an overall „umbrella" language suitable for communication. Solomon Islands are situated in Melanesia in the utmost western part of the Pacific Ocean, north east of Australia and east of Papua New Guinea. The Pacific, the water half of the globe, is divided between Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia. Although vast in area, the Pacific inhabits only around 10 million people. Of these millions, Papua New Guinea alone has 6 and Hawai'i 1,4. Melanesia (except Papua New Guinea) has 1,7 millions, Polynesia (except Hawai'i) has 0,7 million and Micronesia 0,5 million. Except for the two population giants, Papua New Guinea and Hawai'i, hardly any country reaches above the level of 200 000 inhabitants (Statistics from Ethnologue 2011).

POLYNESIA

Roughly speaking, Polynesia stretches from Tonga in the west, Rapa Nui (Easter Island) in the east, Hawaii in the north and Aotearoa (New Zealand) in the south. The linguistic situation can be characterized as „Many Countries – One Language". The different countries in Polynesia usually have one or only a few indigenous languages per country. Tonga has Tongan, Samoa has Samoan, etc. In spite of this huge area, the Polynesian languages themselves – Tongan, Samoan, Tahitian, Hawaiian, Rapanui, Rarotongan, Maori, etc. – are fairly closely related, both genetically and typologically. This was discovered in the 19th century, when explorers and seafarers listed lexical similarities among the languages. They all belong to the Austronesian family (1257 languages), the Polynesian sub branch (37 languages). See fig. 1 for a classification.

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MELANESIA

Melanesia is smaller in area than Polynesia and consists of fewer countries (but has a higher population). The linguistic variety is striking. The saying for Melanesia can be expressed as „One Country – Many Languages". The Melanesian countries Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Caledonia have around 40–100 languages. Each. The neighbouring country Papua New Guinea is not a part of the Pacific but is included in Melanesia. This country has the highest number of languages in the world, reaching some 1000 languages. The Austronesian language family is the main one in Melanesia (excluding Papua New Guinea), with the Central-Eastern Oceanic, Temotu and Western Oceanic branches. Some Polynesian languages are also spoken in Melanesia. As shown below, the Polynesian languages make a sub branch of the Central-Eastern branch. There is also a small family, Central Solomons, including only 4 languages, possibly related to languages in Papua New Guinea. See fig. 1 for classification.

Austronesian (1257 languages)

- → Malayo-Polynesian
  - → Central-Eastern
    - → Eastern Malayo-Polynesian
      - → Oceanic (506)
        - → Admirality Islands (31)
        - → Central-Eastern Oceanic (227)
          - → Remote Oceanic (192)
            - → Central Pacific (44)
              - → East Fijian-Polynesian (41)
                - → **East Fijian** (4)
                - → ***Polynesian*** (37)
              - → **West Fijian-Rotuman** (3)
            - → **Loyalty Islands** (3)
            - → Micronesian (20)
            - → **New Caledonian** (30)
            - → **North and Central Vanuatu** (95)
          - → **South Vanuatu** (9)
          - → **Southeast Solomonic** (26)
        - →St. Matthias (2)
        - → **Temotu** (9)
        - → Western Oceanic (236)
          - → **Meso Melanesian** (69)
          - → North New Guinea (105)
          - → Papuan Tip (62)
        - → Yapese (1)

Central Solomons (4 languages)

Figure 1. Classification of language branches and sub branches in the Pacific (excluding Papua New Guinea). Extract from Ethnologue 2011.

Languages belonging to branches and sub branches in ***this format*** (Bold, Italic) are spoken in Polynesia *and* Melanesia. Languages belonging to branches and sub branches in **this format** (Bold) are spoken in Melanesia.

CREOLE LANGUAGES

Countries like those in Melanesia would not be able to function as a modern nation without an overall „umbrella" language, fit for communication. Thus, Solomon Islands have their Pijin, Vanuatu has its Bislama, Papua New Guinea has its Tok Pisin. Back in history, each island and each village, i.e. each linguistic community, lived separately from each other with spare contacts, consisting of trade and warfare. In border areas between different communities, people knew some neighbouring languages, but there was no need for further linguistic skills. In the 19th century, the arrival of European traders, missionaries, blackbirders and colonizers, lead to an overall reshuffling of people. People were brought together, by wish or by force, and suddenly it was not enough to know only the neighbour's language. Solomon Islands became a British protectorate while Vanuatu was divided between England and France. The island of New Guinea was controlled by Germany, Netherlands, Australia. Half of the island is still under Indonesian control, while the other half is the independent Papua New Guinea.

As one may assume, „Pijin" or „Pisin" began as pidgin languages, i.e. simplified means of communication now-and-here, but they soon developed into fully fledged creole languages. This process is characterized by a higher degree of grammatization and standardization. They are useful nowadays for every possible purpose of a modern society. For most people having a local mother tongue, creole is their second language, but for the increasing number of children born in mixed marriages, creole will be their first language and mother tongue.

All these three varieties – Solomon Islands Pijin, Bislama and Tok Pisin – are highly mutually intelligible, and for Scandinavians they can be compared to Swedish, Norwegian and Danish. New Caledonia is still a French colony, and the need of an overall „umbrella" language is fulfilled by French. The fourth Melanesian country, Fiji, plays a somewhat intermediate role between Melanesia and Polynesia. While the people are ethnical Melanesians, the linguistic (and, by all means, the cultural) patterns are similar to those in Polynesia. They have only a few indigenous languages, and one of them, Standard Fijian, is the official one besides English and Hindi.

MULTILINGUALISM IN SOLOMON ISLANDS

Since historical times, in border areas between different linguistic communities it is not uncommon to know the language of the neighbouring group. This makes the speakers bilingual. Still, some people are monolingual, mostly elderly people who have never been out of their own linguistic and ethnic area.

While Bislama in Vanuatu and Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea have the status of an official language, the status of Pijin in Solomon Islands is weaker. The official language is English, and Pijin is sometimes looked down upon as not being a „real" language. It's sometimes called „Baby English", „Broken English", etc. – a fate being shared by many other creole languages around the world. It is not being taught in school, it is the colloquial language of the street, of the market, of the working place, of friendship, of mixed marriages. Almost everybody in Solomon Islands knows Pijin, and together with their own native language and that of their neighbour, this makes them trilingual.

Proficiency in English makes the speakers quadrolingual. English is being taught in school, but due to lack of practice, it is mastered by only a few: those with a higher education and those within the minor tourism industry. In parliament, the debates are held in English, while the discussions in the lobby are held in Pijin. The radio and TV broadcasts have news both in English and Pijin.

SOLOMON ISLANDS PIJIN

Pijin is primarily a spoken language, and when it appears in written form, the spelling is not standardized and therefore inconsequent. It appears in written form mainly as handwritten road signs or social projects. The following are examples from a charming calendar, published by Soroptimists International Solomon Islands. The choice of Pijin is a deliberate choice in order to reach as many people as possible with their messages:

Eg. 1. *! Lokol kaikai hemi nambawan !*

'Local food is number one (= the best)!' (Picture of two women harvesting vegetables.)

Eg. 2. *Evri memba blong komuniti garem ples blong hem. Peim skul yunifom long hia.*

'Every member of the community has a place for him-/herself. Buy school uniform here.' (Picture of a woman in wheelchair selling clothes to two customers.)

Eg. 3. *Olketa gele impoten tumas long yumi.*

Nomata wanem nao olketa laek peim, mifala nating save letem yu go wetem man ya. !Yu barava spesol an impoten tumas long mitufala and mifala lavem yu tumas!

'All girls are very important for us.
No matter whatever things they want to buy (for you), we cannot let you go with that man. You are just very special and important for the two of us and we love you very much!' (Picture of parents warning their daughter.)

Eg. 4. *Komuniti Seving Bank – smol selen from wanwan memba save givim pawa long evri memba fo duim wanem nao olketa laek fo duim.*

1 peim skul fi.
2 statem hom bisnis.
3 bildim haos.
4 peim sola laet.
5 peim olketa samting fo mekem haos naes.

'Community Saving Bank – small (amount of) money from each member can give power for every member to do whatever they want to do. (Picture of two women depositing money to a third one.)

1 pay school fees.
2 start home business.
3 build a house.
4 buy solar light.
5 buy everything to make the house nice.'

As Solomon Islands Pijin is an English-based creole language, the lexicon has plenty of English words. However, the meaning isn't always the same as in English. The following lexical-semantic features can be mentioned (Lindvall Arika 2011):

- *Kilim* doesn't mean 'kill' but 'hit'. 'Kill' is *kilim dae*.
- *Lusim* doesn't mean 'loose', but 'leave', 'depart'.
- *Nomoe* doesn't mean 'no more' but 'only', 'just'.
- *Oposit* doesn't mean 'opposite' but 'beside'. 'Opposite' is *nader saed* (another side).
- *Swim* doesn't only mean 'swim' but also 'bathe', 'shower'.
- *Nila* means both 'nail' and 'needle'.
- *Pei* means both 'pay' and 'buy'.

The grammar shares many features with the indigenous languages. Such features, typical for Austronesian languages but not used in English, are:

- Personal pronouns differentiate between gender

him 'he, she'

- Personal pronouns (may) have singular, dual, trial and plural forms.

yu 'thou'
yutufala/iuta 'you two fellows, the two of you' *yutrifala* 'you three fellows, the three of you'
yufala 'you fellows, more than two/three'

- Personal pronouns, first person plural, have exclusive and inclusive forms. This is combined with dual, trial etc. (See example 3 above)

mifala ‘we, but not you’ (excluding the listener)
mitufala ‘the two of us, but not you’ (excluding the listener)
yumi ‘you and me’ (including the listener)

● Transitive verbs have a suffix -m, -im, -em. (See examples 2, 3, 4 above)

pei ‘pay, buy’	*peim skul yunifom* ‘pay + SUFF school uniform’
let ‘let’	*letem yu go* ‘let + SUFF you go’
lav ‘love’	*lavem yu* ‘love + SUFF you’
stat ‘start’	*statem hom bisnis* ‘start + SUFF home business’
bild ‘build’	*bildim haos* ‘build + SUFF a house’

KWAIO

The last topic to be mentioned here is one of the 70 indigenous languages, namely Kwaio. Kwaio is spoken in the north/central part of Malaita, one of the largest islands in Solomon Islands. It has two main dialects, West Kwaio and East Kwaio, separated by dense rainforest and sharp-edged mountains. Kwaio is one of the largest languages in Solomon Islands with around 13 000 speakers.

Austronesian
→ Malayo-Polynesian
→ Central-Eastern
→ Eastern Malayo-Polynesian
→ Oceanic
→ Central-Eastern Oceanic
→ Southeast Solomonic
→ Malaita-San Cristobal
→ Malaita
→ Northern
→ *Kwaio*

Figure 2. Classification of Kwaio language in Solomon Islands.
Extract from Ethnologue 2011.

Kwaio, like practically all of the indigenous languages in Solomon Islands, is a member of the Austronesian language family. It shares the Central-Eastern Oceanic branch with the Polynesian languages. But while Polynesian languages follow the Remote Oceanic sub branch, Kwaio follows the South East Solomonic sub branch), see fig. 2. Thus, Kwaio is not too closely related to the Polynesian languages. However, typologically, it shares many features with them. On the morphological level, they share the characteristics mentioned above about Solomon Islands Pijin (e.g. dual forms), and on the phonological level, the following features can be mentioned:

● Few consonants
● Glottal stop

- ● Distinctive vowel length
- ● Complementary distribution of [l] and [r]
- ● CV syllable structure, open syllables

The word order in Kwaio is SVO (Subject – Verb – Object). The Adjective follows the Noun, and the language has prepositions. This is a word order similar to that of French.

Kwaio and smaller languages are endangered, as young speakers tend to communicate in Pijin at the cost of their native tongue. This phenomenon increases with the general increasing dynamics and moving of a modern nation. Code-switching is frequent, both between the indigenous languages and Pijin, and between Pijin and English.

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Abstract

This paper has given a brief overview of the linguistic pattern in Pacific, with focus on multilingualism in Melanesia. The linguistic diversity has given rise to creole languages in three of the Melanesian countries: Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea. These creole languages – Solomon Islands Pijin, Bislama and Tok Pisin – are based on English but consist of many features from the indigenous languages. Some examples are given from Solomon Islands Pijin. Finally Kwaio, one of the indigenous languages, has been given a brief presentation.

Keywords: *Solomon Islands, Melanesia, languages, multilingualism, creole, Pijin, Kwaio*.

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